

Six Profound Changes Confronting The Church

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In a previous letter I examined four specific and historical ways God seems to bring change to his church. In this “supplemental” letter I want to briefly discuss what I see as six (6) profound changes which are currently changing the spiritual landscape, both for traditional Church and for organic house church. Believe it or not, there is a progression in these changes - a “domino effect” of sorts. So bear with me.

1. The Rise of A Post Christian Post Modern Culture. Most Christians today are blissfully unaware of the profound impact of these two cultural trends. They are not new, but the cumulative effect is both profound and under-appreciated. The idea that we have entered a post-Christian understanding of culture is not new. It began emerging in earnest in the 50 years leading up to WW2. Simply put, to be “post Christian” means that our culture no longer needs Christian or biblical values or explanations to explain itself in the many spheres of life: politics, law, sociology, economics, philosophy, education, science, etc. Christian values no longer guide or even inform these areas of our shared cultural existence. The only time politicians care what Christians think is when they fear that Christians (particularly evangelical Christians) might vote as a significant block on one issue or another. Even then, they are not asking for Christians to “inform” the debate, but to vote a particular way.

To be “postmodern” is to take this a step further. The age of “Modernism” began during with the Enlightenment in 18th century Europe. It maintained that science and reason alone could reach all of the same spiritual and moral truths of Christianity but without the trappings of “faith” and “religion”. But the optimistic ideology of early rationalism quickly gave way to skepticism and doubt at the hands of people like Hume and Kant (to name but a few). By the end of the 19th century the last gasp of a struggling modern rationalism was soffocated by the Nihilism (“no meaning”) of Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche who declared what others before him had feared but been unwilling to articulate. God is dead. Man is alone. There is no ultimate truth, and even if it exists, knowledge of it is impossible. Man must make the best of a bad situation and save himself. Nietzsche’s nihilism (knowledge of ultimate reality is impossible, if it even exists) was postmodern before its time. It’s impact was profound both inside and outside the church. Over the period of a century following his death (August 25, 1900) philosophers and theologians sought to escape the clutches of the philosophical black hole created by Nietzsche’s nihilism and the philosophical death of modernism. Secular philosophers such as Jean Paul Sartre and Albert Camus attempted to escape meaninglessness through existentialism. Religious philosophers and theologians attempted to escape through religious existentialism in the form of Barthian Neo-Orthodoxy (“I believe, I just don’t have any proof”). Social “theologians” and philosophers sought to escape the meaninglessness created by the death of God by redefining “salvation” to mean saving men by improving the conditions of their daily lives here and now (the underlying philosophy behind Charles Sheldon’s runaway book, “In His Steps”).

2. The Shift From A Modern Apologetic To A Post Modern Apologetic. The Church - particularly the Evangelical Church - is normally a generation behind the surrounding culture. For a brief period following WW2 the Church seemed to straddle the transition between the rise of nihilism and the collapse of Modernism on the one hand and the rise of Postmodernism on the other. This was seen in two profound ways. First, it was seen in the spiritual awakening frequently referred to as “The Jesus Movement” of the 60s and 70s which broke out on college campuses across the United States. Secondly, it is seen in the lives of the three brightest Christian apologists of the post-WW2 period: C.S. Lewis, who brought academic credibility and penetrating insight into the defense of the Christian faith; Dr. Francis A. Schaeffer, who analyzed the philosophical collapse of the West for a Christian audience coming late to the philosophical game, and Josh McDowell, who popularized the field of evidential apologetics through college lectures and popular writings. While all three approaches to presenting and defending the Christian message were successful for a season in exposing a Post WW2 generation to the claims of Christ, the rising tide of Postmodernism could not be held back in the Culture at large. It manifested and burst forth in the Counter Culture movement of the 60 and 70s.

3. The Collapse of Heritage And The Rise of Shared Experience. The ripple effects of Postmodernism were not limited to secular culture. Whatever affects the surrounding culture eventually affects the Church. Postmodernism was -and is - no exception, and one of the first casualties of it’s impact was the collapse of a common Christian heritage. Prior to WW2, and for a brief period of, say, 30 years afterwards, Christians for the most part shared a common heritage, usually centered around a denomination (for example, my parents were Methodists, and I grew up in the United Methodist Church, until I was saved during the Jesus Movement). This shared spiritual heritage created a common identity and formed a bond among believers who shared that heritage. This heritage represented their small piece of the larger “meta-narrative” (an over-arching story which embodies universal truths which must be universally embraced) of historic, orthodox Christianity. But by the latter half of the 20th Century, the rise of an increasingly secular Postmodern culture saw a growing rejection of all such “meta-narratives” (“big stories”) in favor of “personal narratives” (“that may be true for you, but this is true for me”).

This has had a profound impact upon the traditional organized Church, consisting of denominations. Simply put, Protestant denominations in America are in a long-term process of collapse in both membership/attendance and impact because our Culture has rejected both the larger “meta-narrative” of Christianity, and the smaller piece of that “meta-narrative” which a particular denomination represents. This is true across the board, including the largest American protestant denomination, the Southern Baptist Convention. And because this kind of “nominalism” is like water - always seeking it’s lowest level - not only are denominations being rejected, but so are nearly all forms of organized church.

The Postmodern skepticism regarding “meta-narratives” (“big stories” which call for personal allegiance and bind people together) has given rise to individual “personal” stories. In matters of spirituality - including Christian spirituality and the Church - personal experiences and the personal stories those experiences create have now become the ruling norm (“I had an experience which was genuine and is therefore ‘true for me’”). On a corporate level, rather than looking to a shared church or denominational heritage for their spiritual identity, an increasing number of professing believers are finding both identity and unity around the immediate “value” of a shared spiritual experience (again, a personal experience, but in a group setting), rather than shared memories or heritage. At a basic grassroots level this has led to less emphasis upon theological framework or denominational distinctives, and more emphasis upon an immediate and personal value of experiencing God.

This has led to several problems which tend to affect organic house churches as well as institutional churches. First, it has led to the problem of “immediacy”. Simply put, immediacy means that if my experience of Church doesn’t meet my immediate needs and expectations this week, I won’t be back next week. While this is an obvious exaggeration to make a point, the truth of the point can quickly be seen in the number of “spiritual tire kickers” who pass through the average evangelical church (yes, including organic house churches). If all of the “spiritual tire kickers” who have passed through our house church had stayed for any length of time, we would need a building (or would have planted numerous house churches!).

Second, an emphasis upon the value of an immediate spiritual experience has opened the door to questionable spiritual experiences and outright deception through meetings designed to create such immediate experiences: manna, gold dust, angel feathers, glory bombs, kundalini spirits, and more. I have seen these kinds of meetings making their way through the organic house church movement.

Third, the collapse of denominations has also led to the loss of a homogenous theology (a common theology shared by the congregation, usually built around a specific confession or doctrinal statement), which in turn has led to the loss of anything resembling a theologically homogeneous congregation. How many people attending Presbyterian churches have even read the Westminster Confession, the Shorter Catechism or the Heidelberg Confession, much less believe it. In recent years there has been a heated discussion among leaders in the Assemblies of God about the growing number of Assembly pastors who neither practice nor teach speaking in tongues. In our Postmodern culture (which has dramatically affected the Church in numerous ways from the pew to the pulpit), a homogeneous theology can only be maintained by an appeal to authoritarianism, but that is a superficial remedy at best.

4. The Direct Experience of A Powerful, Personal & Intervening God. The direct or “immediate” experience of a powerful, personal and intervening God has always been true during times of genuine revival. But beginning with Azusa Street and the world wide spiritual outpouring of 1904 - 1907, the 20th century witnessed a growing personal hunger for God. Unfortunately, many in the Church - particularly the Evangelical wing of the Church - regarded Azusa as an aberration due to a failure to see and understand it within a the larger context of the worldwide outpouring of the Holy Spirit which began in Wales and swept over the entire world between 1904 and 1907. In the years after World War 2, several things occurred to change this view. First, the Jesus Movement and the Charismatic Movement of the 60s and 70s brought a renewed focus upon a personal relationship with Jesus and the personal empowering of the Holy Spirit in the life of the believer. Second, the “Third Wave” movement of the 80s and 90s, represented by such people as John Wimber of the Vineyard did much to introduce a new evangelical audience (Wimber emerged from the Calvary Chapel denomination) to what Wimber described as “a supernatural church”. Third, along more traditional lines, the writings of Southern Baptist Henry Blackaby and his emphasis upon “Experiencing God” did much to create a spiritual hunger for a more direct experience of God.

As a result of these profound shifts in the Church’s understanding of how people experience God directly, the average believer or person in the pew came both to believe and expect a direct personal experience with a supernatural, intervening God. In addition, the individual believer could now experience God in places not normally regarded as religious (i.e., a traditional church building). In fact, you didn’t even need a “pastor” or other professional “clergy” in order to experience God. For a new generation of believers, true and genuine spirituality equaled immediate personal experience.

But this new emphasis upon immediate personal spirituality has also had its downside. It has often had the negative effect of encouraging or producing a lack of spiritual discipline. Immediate experience has replaced the personal spiritual

disciplines of the Christian life, and has seriously blurred the distinction between a spiritual disciple versus a spiritual experience chaser. In addition, the emphasis upon immediate personal spiritual experience has also had the effect of weakening the tie between the individual believer and the church (whether institutional or organic). If I can experience God directly and immediately, what do I need you for?

5. The Rise of Communications And Social Networking. The change in forms of communication over the past decade or so has been profound beyond words. The rise of cell phones, E-mail, the internet, CDs, DVDs, podcasts, YouTube, Facebook, Twitter, blogs and more has forever changed the way information (including spiritual truths) gets communicated. Today, anyone, regardless of training, knowledge or ability can start a blog, post a website, upload teaching videos and effectively impact a generation - for good or for ill. The recent controversy over whether or not Mars Hill Pastor Rob Bell is a Universalist was almost exclusively an on-line internet phenomenon, as has the preceding rise of increased discussion of universalism via internet websites and blogs (which will go unmentioned here).

From a positive perspective, this deluge-like flow of information means that “body life” within the Christian community is much more creative and vibrant than it was 20 years ago (or even 10 years ago). More professing Christians are finding a voice and are becoming involved in the spiritual life of the Church - even if it means leaving the four walls of the traditional church. This is a good thing, facilitated by a more free and a much faster flow of knowledge and information among believers.

But there are also several downsides to this phenomenon. First, there is less depth in relationships. Our relationships have become as superficial as our means of communication. Protests to the contrary, these communication vehicles tend to lend themselves more to distraction than to discipleship. Discipleship is a mentoring process by which we impart spiritual values and skills (gifts applied). Volumes of information dumped on websites or an endless supply of pithy quotes tweeted to a cadre of followers are a poor - if not wholly inadequate - substitute for personal discipleship. Jesus, too, had many followers, most of whom never “got it”. But He only had 12 disciples. How about you?

Second, the explosion of communication vehicles has also generated a growing multiplicity of “spiritual teachers,” people who are accountable to no one in particular but can hold great sway over significant numbers of believers. Today, anyone with a microphone, an MP3 recorder or a video camera can post “teachings” on the internet for anyone anywhere in the world to access. And anyone with a few hundred bucks can publish a book and get it listed on Amazon.com. As an old communications professor from the University of Georgia once told me, “Remember, a talker is a hawker, but a writer is an expert”. The age of modern communications has turned theological “nincompoops” (sorry, but it’s true) into experts on everything from spiritual gifts to universalism. And in the process we have experienced an abysmal loss of knowledge regarding the historic and foundational truths of the Orthodox faith.

6. The Collapse of Old Church Paradigms and The Rise of New Ones. And those previous five (5) points are a large part of why we have witnessed and are witnessing an explosion in alternative paradigms of “church”. In a very real sense, the meteoric rise of the organic house church movement has been in no small part fueled by the impact of Postmodernism upon the Church. Just as Postmodernism has collapsed commonly held meta-narratives regarding everything from morals to marriage to music and more, it’s influence upon the Church has collapsed Christian meta-narratives of denominations, shared heritage, orthodox theology, and more. As the influence of Postmodern nihilism and nominalism has taken hold, theology has become less “theocentric” (God-centered) and more “anthropocentric” (“man-centered”), less about God and more about me and how I feel about God. Theology has given way to therapy, both inside and outside the Church.

Conclusions And Applications

1. Ours is a Post-Christian Postmodern Culture. Simply put, our culture has concluded that it doesn’t need us to either explain or give meaning to their world. Period. As I wrote in my book, “The Least of These” regarding good deeds, “Our Postmodern culture has concluded that it can manifest ‘good deeds’ without Jesus. The Church has concluded that it can manifest Jesus without ‘good deeds’. Our Postmodern culture’s plan appears to be working. The Church’s plan is a disaster.” From the perspective of our Postmodern culture, Christianity isn’t so much wrong as irrelevant. The same can be said of the Church. Question: how is your organic house church any more relevant than the institutional mega-church across town?

2. In our Postmodern Culture (including the Church) spiritual opinions, especially those based on personal experiences - regardless of how well or ill informed - are self-validating and therefore true. As a result, more people get their “theology” from Oprah than from a pastor or even from the teaching of Scripture. This creates a challenge for the task of teaching in organic house church, as people today are as willing to listen to false teachers and their own opinions as they are to gifted spiritual teachers communicating biblical truth.